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ABSTRACT

The advantages of cooperative education for English departments and the role of the faculty member as a consultant for the program are discussed, based on the experience of Northeastern University. Attention is directed to starting this type of program in the English department, the consultant's role as a catalyst, placing English majors, and motivating students. For the faculty advisor and consultant, participation offers the opportunity to gain professional business experience and contacts. It is suggested that the consultant is an active faculty member in teaching, publication, and scholarship. Cooperative education is the student's first experience in searching for a career. At the end of the experience, the cooperative education program serves as a transition to the workplace, and permanent employment with the employer may occur. It is noted that the writing talent of English majors is valued by groups within large organizations, such as corporate relations, marketing, advertising, information services, personnel, and human resources. In addition, business executives recognize that a background in liberal arts provides essential knowledge, cultivates intellectual skills, and develops personality and character. (SW)

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Consultants and Cooperative Education: The Northeastern English Department Business Connections

by Michael B. Goodman

Delivered at the 1983 MLA Convention as part of the ADE sponsored session "English Departments with successful links to Business and Professional Communities"

December 29, 1983

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To redefine the value and practical usefulness of a degree in English for those brave students of yours who still persist in majoring in it, let me suggest an ism to consider--PRAGMATISM. What we will discuss here for a very few minutes is applied English, working English, English that motivates, stimulates, and--can we say it out loud now--earns money.

SIX ASSUMPTIONS

To speak practically about consulting and English department faculty, let me make six assumptions.

First, the consultant is an active faculty member in teaching, publication, scholarship, a sort of super English major. Consultants are also entrepreneurs. Third, business executives recognize, more and more, that a background in liberal arts provides essential knowledge, cultivates intellectial skills, and develops personality and character. Fourth, students who major in English possess valuable and marketable skills. And fifth, the college placement office is the worst place for them to go to get advice and help in finding a job mainly because no one advertises for an English Major and the skills do not fit easily into a standard job title.

Last, but most important, consulting is both academically and financially beneficial to the individual faculty member and to the department.

FROM IVORY TOWER TO GLASS HIGHRISE

In addition to personal financial rewards and book contracts, functioning as a consultant to business provides credibility to lectures and classroom discussion of business and professional

communication. Consulting to business has greatly enhanced our English department's administration of a required writing workshop for the Graduate School of Business and strengthened the program content. Faculty consultants also experience in a few days or weeks what would require several years on the job. Consulting gives you intellectual stimulation, new experiences, and the opportunity to work with bright, successful professionals. Also, most businesses provide you the necessary support services for formal presentations and lectures.

But most important for those of you who advise students, consulting provides CONTACTS.

CONSULTANT AS CATALYST

Consultants and faculty with business and professional experience successfully combine the pragmatism essential to the workplace, and the intellectual idealism of the academy. Rather than conflict, such people provide a catalyst to create a new relationship between business and the academy. As a consultant you represent to business both the English department specifically and the academy in general. To business and the academy you bring a freshness of perception that transcends commonplace careerist attitudes. You bring a professonalism and a quality of mind that benefits both worlds.

THE LINK BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE: COOPERATIVE EDUCATION

The concept of Cooperative Education is not new. For us, mentoring programs as part of the Ph.D. requirements, the medieval

SELLING THE IDEA TO STUDENTS

Anyone who participates in a cooperative education program as the English Department advisor to students can convince students of its value by discussing the financial, personal, and intellectual benefits.

Numerous studies of the impact of Cooperative Education on students performed at Northeastern's Center for Cooperative Education indicate at least seven demonstrable effects of the experience on student attitudes and behavior. Not only does participation clarify a student's career and professional goals, it also promotes confidence in the choice of career, and demonstrates the connection between work and study. The experience also increases student academic performance and provides, as well, the financial and personal rewards from the working world, the world of adults. It also builds competence, self-reliance, self-esteem, maturity, sense of purpose, and better interpersonal relations.

Other benefits to students, indicated by Sylvia Brown in Cooperative education and Career Development (1976) include higher starting salaries, generally $1,000 or more.

Women who have participated in a Coop Program persued their careers longer before having a family. Also ten years after graduation, such women were in more non-traditional, which I interpret as managerial and professional rather than clerical and secretarial, positions than graduates who were not part of the Coop Program.

system of apprenticeships and the structure of guilds provide early, familiar precedents. And in this country professions such as engineering, business, law, and medicine have strong traditions of providing on the job experience. However, until recently the idea had little appeal to the liberal arts disciplines, in other than a dilitantish way through summer programs with New York publishing houses, because of the taint of careerism, the suggestion of a trade-school curriculum, or the most feared of all--usefulness.

Nevertheless, a cooperative education program has benefits for you, your students, and for employers. Such a program, though forces you to sell. You must convince yourself, your students, your department, and employers of the value of this approach to education.

SELL THE IDEA TO YOURSELF

Two main benefits come your way if you participate as a faculty advisor and as a consultant in a cooperative education program. Participation offers you an opportunity to gain professional business experience and contacts that give your classroom performance authenticity and also supply you with valuable information to update your writing and professional development courses. You also have the possibility of making future contacts for clients to build your own consultancy.

Before you can convince others, be sure that you have an interest, commitment, and personality to function as the catalyst between your students, fellow faculty members, and possible employers. All you need, as far as personality traits, are tolerence, patience, insight, and courage. And of course every professor of English has an abundance of each of these.

TYPES OF POSITIONS STUDENTS CAN EXPECT

Coop positions tend to be paid; internships tend to be unpaid. PAID or coop positions have the obvious benefit of immendiate financial compensation, and in that sense evoke a more professional attitude on the student's part. In addition to paying for almost all college expensense, such positions also helps them command a better salary later. Paid positions are desirable for emloyers because students take the work more seriously. These positions are not usually make-work or go-fer jobs, but real producing activities.

Unpaid positions or internships offer the students, usually freshmen or sophomores a chance to learn about the profession first hand. Eventhough paid, they often provide a student's first work experience. Both paid and unpaid positions prepare students for the act of getting work, helps shape career goals, and often lead to full-time employment.

SELLING THE NOTION TO THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

The toughest sell, if you have made your own commitment and convinced students, is of your fellow English department faculty. It might help you to avoid moot discussions of the humanist's battle against the Philistines, or even to try to convince your colleagues that such a careerist activity would not dilute the purity of literary study. Better pursue its benefits.

Primarily an active coop program supported by faculty can in these times of shrinking enrollments, keep and attract students to the English major. It can focus the student's perception of the useful activities of the profession, and potentially integrate both

academic and career development. In this way it serves to unify a department through a shared goal and purpose for its majors, those courageous young people who faced with the clarion calls for business and high technology choose to devote themselves to a very old technology indeed.

An active department also has the opportunity to update its curriculum, expand senior placement, use faculty and space more efficiently, and to secure outside funds for career development and placement. Since a Coop program requires the English department to work with other administrative offices such as placement and cooperative education, it also develops a stronger position for the department within the university bureaucracy.

CONVINCE EMPLOYERS

When you talk to employers you really market your university, your department and yourself. In discussing the possibility of a position for a cooperative education student with a prospective employer, you might benefit from a study of six organizations, including G.E. Xerox, and the Social Security Department conducted by the consulting firm Arthur D. Little, Documented Employer Benefits from Co-p Education. The investigators identified three phases which benefit employers.

First, is preprofessional employment, or the student's first experience with the search for permanent career employment. For employers students in this phase provide a good source of pre-professional personnel. Both student and employer can evaluate one another, improving personnel selection. The program also promotes an

effective relationship with the university which improves recruiting through faculty contacts and establishes a vehicle for information on job functions, skills, and requirements.

In the second phase, recruitment, selection, and orientation makeup initial training. Typically, the student's last experience on coop really serves as the transition to the workplace. For employers it eases entry-level recruiting, improves access to and by minorities, and improves orientation and training.

The third phase or permanent employment occurs if an employer hires a former coop student. Such employees exhibit higher retention, less attrition; perform better on staff performance appraisals; and such people have a greater chance for advancement and promotion.

Generally the employer who participates in a coop program can expect a stable, prescreened source of intelligent, upwardly mobile preprofessional personnel. Such students are flexible, and they allow employers to free full-time professionals by taking on some of their responsibilities. In addition, such programs promote better relationships between industry and colleges.

WHAT ENGLISH MAJORS OFFER

In general, English majors are motivated, enthusiastic, broad fresh thinkers. They possess valuable, marketable skills. They write and speak well. They can teach others, and when forced, they can even perform research, and organize information in writing.

More importantly, in a time when many business executives complain about the narrowmindedness of business school graduates, an English major, as a rarity, adds a fresh perspective on business--a

welcome dimension for the office.

As far as the acceptance of the liberal arts major into the business world, Stephen Kane in his dissertation Employer Attitudes Relative to the Hiring of Cooperative Education Students (Northeastern 1981), concluded:

> ...there is no difference in attitudes between employees who employ students majoring in curricula that will prepare them for entry into structured professions [accounting, mechanical engineering, etc.] and employers who employ students majoring in curricula that will prepare them for entry into non-structured professions [liberal arts].

WHO TO ASK

If a cooperative education program exists on your campus, contact them, as well as the career development office. The novelty of a professor from the humanities taking such an interest will achieve results. Do yourself a favor and work with them, don't try to develop any type of program independently.

You can, however, cultivate contacts and leads independently. Begin with a check of directories or the chamber of commerce for local businesses that need the communications skills of an English major. Generally, an organization which hires over 500 people has some type of group that handles publications which require writing, editing, and proofreading.

The alumni of your department in business and professional communities offer another fruitful source of contacts. Also show

an interest in local businesses by visiting them and asking for their advice, but show some familiarity with what they do. A quick trip to the library reference room will give you access to sources that have a strong overview of companies in your area. You can also visit local community groups--Lions, Rotary, and professional organizations and clubs.

Making the contacts is the most important step in contributing to a strong Cooperative Education Program for English majors.

PLACING ENGLISH MAJORS: WHAT TO ASK FOR

Be realistic about the English major in the work place. Ask for entry level or trainee positions for beginning students. Many of them can fit into diverse businesses--finance to aerospace, in support roles. Groups within large organizations, such as presentations, corporate relations, marketing, advertising, information services, personnel, human resources, value the writing talents of English majors. They also train new people in their particular methods and procedures.

MOTIVATE STUDENTS

Remember that it is the students who must do the work for themselves. Getting and keeping the first job builds self-confidence, maturity, and professional skills.

What you can do is follow-up after placement to make sure that the experience is meaningful for the student.

THE NORTHEASTERN EXPERIENCES

In the past two years English majors at Northeastern have held positions with the following results:

Technical Writing--Data General
--GTE
--Culinane
--Computer Vision
--Raytheon
--DEC

Magazine Editor --High Tech Trade Publication

Corporate Relations--Mobil Oil

Editorial Assistant--Boston Globe
--Local PR Firm
--March of Dimes
--Museum of Art
--Life Insurance

Teaching --ESL Program

Speech Writer --Political Campaign

Library Asstistant --Government and University

Administrative Assistant--University, Business, Government

Last year our top student won a position as a technical writer with a starting salary of almost $5,000 a year better than the average for English graduates in 1983. He can take all the credit for his own success because he has initiative, talent, and self-confidence. He knows how valuable his writing skills are to industry. His success alone validates the English department's active participation in cooperative education.

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